

FOOD SAFETY ENVIRONMENTAL PRACTICE

WHAT IS THE PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUE?

Foodborne diseases cause about 76 million illnesses, 325,000 hospitalizations, and 5,000 deaths in the United States each year. FoodNet data indicate that eating outside the home poses an increased risk of developing a foodborne illness. Food preparation is a complex process with many factors that may influence the safety of the food. Some of those factors include the knowledge and hygienic practices of the people who prepare food, as well as the equipment used the preparation process and inherent qualities of the food itself. To prevent foodborne illness, it is necessary to understand the factors that set the stage for outbreaks and illness to occur.

WHAT HAS CDC ACCOMPLISHED?

CDC, in collaboration with the Food and Drug Administration and eight states (California, Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Minnesota, New York, Oregon, and Tennessee), has established the Environmental Health Specialists Network (EHS-Net), a network of environmental health specialists who work to improve environmental health. Although EHS-Net plans to address various environmental health issues such as air and water quality, the current focus is food safety. EHS-Net has designed a project to better understand food-handling practices and how these practices relate to foodborne illness. Environmental health specialists will gather information from restaurants and other facilities where food is served outside the home. The objective is to determine what causes foodborne outbreaks and why these outbreaks occur.

Environmental health specialists evaluate food-handling practices and policies in food establishments that have had recent outbreaks, as well as in establishments with no known recent history of outbreaks or illness complaints. Data collected from these evaluations are entered into an electronic database and analyzed to identify underlying factors related to foodborne disease. This information will help environmental health specialists determine the effectiveness of existing strategies and also help them develop new prevention strategies for foodborne illness.

WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS?

As data from EHS-Net activities are collected, CDC will share findings with federal, state, local, and tribal food protection programs so that they can design effective food safety programs. Results anticipated for 2004 include

- Establishing policies associated with food-handling practices in restaurants that prepare eggs all day and support an egg-handling study to identify the rate of high-risk egg-handling practices.
- Conducting focus groups with food workers to determine behavioral factors, barriers, and motivations that influence safe food-handling practices.
- Evaluating the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of environmental health specialists regarding food safety and food establishment inspections.
- Assessing the prevalence of self-reported safe food handling practices of food workers.